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THE STUDY OF CLASSICS AS EXPERIENCE OF LIFE¹

BY WILLIAM C. GREENE
Harvard University

In recent years we classicists have fallen into the habit of talking a great deal about the superlative value of our chosen interest. The malice of our enemies and the ignorance of our friends have given us golden opportunities of telling each other why we are better educated than the rest of the world, and of dropping a hint to the vulgar, "Although you can never be like us, be as like us as ever you can." I hope we are sincere in most of the essays and addresses that we devote to this theme; for in truth we hold a great trust. But tonight I shall take all this for granted; we are all friends of classical education, all convinced of its saving mission. If I do not come to praise Caesar, let it not be thought that I come to bury him.

What sometimes gives us moments of disquietude, of course, is the fact that classical education does not today hold its former position, either in the proportion of its followers to the larger number of educated men and women or in the contribution that it makes to the intellectual life of the community. There is no need of rehearsing the obvious and partly inevitable course of events that brought about this condition—the growth of science, the exploitation of material things, the opening of educational facilities to new types of students. It was to be expected that Peter would be robbed to pay Paul; and in our most candid moods we must admit that a certain revision of the claims of the classics was not entirely to be deplored. But whether we have done all that can be done to redress the balance of things is not quite so certain. How the balance may be restored is the question that I ask you to consider.

Let me use a homely simile to make clear the point; for, as Alexander Pope observed, "it is with the eye of the imagination

¹ A paper read at the meeting of the Classical Association of New England, April 2, 1920.

as it is with the corporeal eye, it must sometimes be taken off from the object, in order to see it the better." Let us suppose that we have the task of reducing by a half the weight of a ten-pound tub of butter. We may cut off a little here or a little there, or carve it down with the skill of a Canova; in the end it will weigh only five pounds, but it will remain butter. That is because it is a homogeneous substance. But if we try the same operation on a statue of a man, the result will be different. We may lop off an arm or two, the head, the legs, and we have not a miniature of man; we have a torso, perhaps noble in form, yet not a man. That is because the statue was an organic whole, in which the parts were not interchangeable, but had different functions. Something like this I conceive to be the case of the classics. Once a classical education was an organic whole; its students, besides receiving a discipline in language and self-expression, were learning history, politics, literature, art, philosophy, and science. Many of these branches have gained years and wisdom; some of them are now taught, and better taught, by our colleagues in other departments. So the whittling process has gone on: here an author has been dropped from the classical curriculum, there a field of activity; the majority of boys and girls who begin Greek or Latin in school drop them when they enter college. Is the result a harmonious whole? Does it represent, even on a reduced scale, the substance of the old training? Or is it propaedeutic rather than education, the portal rather than the edifice?

These are generalities: let us consider concrete instances. What really happens to the average student of classics? In the first place, he spends the first year or two mainly on grammar: this is a valuable training in itself and has valuable consequences; few of us know too much grammar. But for most students this means giving to grammar perhaps half of all the time they will ever devote to classics; and this seems disproportionate. Even when they are able to read Greek and Latin after a fashion, the texts usually read do not present an altogether adequate notion of the Greeks and the Romans. Caesar's story is not laid in Italy, and is almost wholly military; the speeches of Cicero most often read deal chiefly with criminal or political cases in which the

details take relatively too much attention, and in which the orator's personality does not appear at its best. It is not easy for the young student to gain from them an understanding of the Roman Republic. The reading is necessarily piecemeal; even when Virgil is reached, the snail's pace of the reader cannot often keep stride with the story, and literary appreciation too often flags. I have been told by a boy of unusual ability, who writes good English verse, that although he had read four books of the *Aeneid* he had never realized that the Romans could write real poetry till he happened to read at sight that passage in the *Metamorphoses* on which Shakespeare drew for Prospero's speech: "Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes, and groves." In the *Anabasis*, the young Hellenist reads a work of genuine interest; yet it does not deal with Greeks of the greatest period, nor with their most characteristic occupations. Homer is attacked so deliberately that Achilles is often left sulking in his tent, Hector and Andromache never meet or part, and Odysseus never sets sail for rocky Ithaca. And before the achievements of the fifth century are even sampled, the ordinary boy or girl usually drops the study of classics. The college undergraduate who elects Greek or Latin will indeed become acquainted with a few masterpieces of literature of various types; but too often these works will be detached from the context which is necessary for a real understanding of them. I have known brilliant undergraduates with a real taste for classics who complained that their courses in Greek and Latin did not require them to think.

Of course these instances do not tell the whole story. Every classical teacher who is alive to the possibilities of his subject tries to supplement the reading of texts in various ways, and by lectures and *obiter dicta* to correct one-sided impressions. We all try, I hope, in some way to reconstruct the whole wonderful mosaic of which only a few broken bits are before our classes. Some of us may feel that we carry this sort of thing as far as our time allows. But if we are candid we must admit that our attempts to correct our pupils' perspective are often futile, because haphazard; it is like trying to change the form of the tree after the twig has already been inclined—or should I say disinclined?

What, then, should we do to make the study of classics once more something organic and harmonious? It need be nothing radical, I think; or at least it need involve no sweeping change. We need only look at the study of classics from a somewhat different point of view, and the right course of action will follow naturally. Suppose we begin with the assumption that what we are going to study, whether in school or in college, is not a collection of texts, the remainder of a larger literature, but the experience of two nations which are especially important because of their achievements and their influence, actual or possible, on us. Notice that I speak of "experience," not of "experiences"; the difference is great. It is possible to have many experiences without gaining experience. The Greeks and the Romans had many experiences which matter very little to us; they also gained a great deal of experience which has become a part of our heritage, and it is this which we wish to study. We are ready, for lack of time, to neglect much that is accidental or eccentric, in order to fix our attention on the central and the permanent. Yet we are on our guard against a spirit of indiscriminating eulogy of things Greek and Roman; that spirit has already done incalculable harm to our cause. We strive to keep a truly critical spirit, as ready to learn from the failures as from the successes of the ancients; and we are always eager to exchange the small coinage of facts for the international currency of truth.

The method will wait humbly on the aim: it will depend on the relation of the part to the whole, and on the age and the capacity of the student. Knowledge of the Greek and the Latin languages, I need hardly say, is a most necessary tool in this study; without it the finest appreciation and understanding of the experience of the Greeks and the Romans will be lost. We shall not willingly assent to any attempt to dispense with it as a part of our study. But a part, and a tool, it will remain; and we shall not refuse to assist in giving whatever understanding of ancient experience can be gained apart from a knowledge of the languages. Granted our initial assumption—that our study is first of all a study of human experience—the poems and speeches and narratives, the statues and the roads will fit into their context in such a way as to explain

each other. Some works, especially poems, will deserve a minute study in the original language; some will be read rapidly or only in part; some will be read in English translations; and many subjects will be introduced by means of those admirable books in English which are now becoming plentiful—books like Zimmern's "Greek Commonwealth," and Warde Fowler's "Social Life at Rome." The student will often hardly know whether he is studying history, literature, art, politics, or philosophy.

What experience should we include in the limited curriculum at our disposal? Perhaps you will let me put before you a short summary of the phases that occur to me as most important. Since I have been preparing material of this kind for several years, I take this opportunity of inviting suggestions and criticisms; for I realize that many others are trying, like myself, to meet the same need. I will confine myself to the Greeks, especially since the Roman field has recently been covered by scholars whose suggestions frequently run parallel to mine.¹

First would come a brief study of the geography of Greece and adjacent lands, with particular emphasis on those aspects of physical geography—mountains, coast-line, soil, and climate—that affected history.

Next would follow a bird's-eye view of the history of the Greeks from the earliest period down to the present day; military history would be reduced to a minimum, but the large characteristics of the successive periods would be noted. This review would not pretend to be a complete course in history, and would serve chiefly to provide the setting for the subsequent study; in many cases it would be superfluous.

Then the student would consider some of the lasting experience gained by the Greeks in their daily life. By this I do not mean a course in antiquities; for most of the details of the private and the public life of the Greeks, though highly interesting, are of secondary importance. The student would learn on how slender a foundation of wealth the Greeks contrived to build their civilization; how the

¹ Dr. Freeman, of Worcester Academy, in a paper presented last February to the Eastern Massachusetts Section of this Association, discussed "Enriching Secondary School Latin"; and Professor Litchfield contributed to the *Classical Journal* in October, 1918, a paper on "Latin and the Liberal College."

methods of industry affected the workman and his product; how the occupations of the leisure hours of the Greek, especially athletics and the drama, entered into his ideals; and how his enforced versatility affected his character. The student would try to reach some conclusions about the significance of a civilization that in general, though not always, preferred quality to quantity, and would try to institute comparisons with our own age.

From the study of daily life the student would pass to certain large types of experience involving artistic and social and rational elements. He would fix his attention on the attempts of the Greeks to find and to create beauty. After noticing the material conditions under which the various arts arose, and the influence of religion and of the public on the arts, he would try to discover the secret of the Greeks' directness and simplicity; he would ask himself whether Greek art gained or lost by its prevailing impersonality, and would notice the difference between the Ionian and the Dorian character in art. He would trace in the several arts the development of a tradition or convention, and would consider whether the tradition or the revolts against the tradition were the more valuable. He would ponder such matters as the "idealism" or the "universality" of Greek literature and sculpture, and the nature of "classic restraint," determining so far as he could their relation to modern literature and art.

Our student would next study the experience of the Greeks in their political and social and ethical development. He would trace the growth of the various forms of government, pausing especially to reflect on the characteristics of the city-state, and the effect on political ideals of the size of the political unit. He would consider with the Greeks the problems of democracy and imperialism, and the means of reconciling freedom with law and freedom with efficiency. With them he would ask what are the rights of the individual and what are the claims of society; how far the antithesis of nature and convention is justified; what is the theory of slavery, of the rights of minorities, of ostracism, and of education. He would notice where history solved political questions in a different way from that of the political theorists. He would weigh Thucydides against Plato, and Plato against

Aristotle, and would compare the ordinary Greek notions with regard to the *καλὸς κἀγαθός* and *σωφροσύνη* and *φιλία* with the reasoned ideals of Plato, asking himself what has been the effect in history, ancient and modern, of utopian ideals.

And, finally, our student would naturally ask what experience the Greeks gained of the larger environment of man, and of his place in the universe. Beginning with the primitive religion of the Greeks, superstition and myth, he would notice the constant opposition in classic times of the intuition and the reason, resulting on the one hand in art and the national religion, on the other hand in science and philosophy. He would consider the rise of humanism in the fifth century, and the attempts of Plato to harmonize and of Aristotle to interpret all the conflicting elements of previous thought. Then would follow the centrifugal tendencies of the Hellenistic and the Roman periods, ending in the absorption by Christianity of much of the best in Greek philosophy. Our student might in conclusion consider whether Christianity had gained by not absorbing the humanism of the Greeks, and might ask himself whether any reconciliation between Christianity and humanism is practicable.

I can imagine the objections that doubtless occur to you all. "What," you say, "would you have us talk about the classics instead of reading them with our pupils? Would you let our personalities and our views usurp the rightful place of the great men of old? Would not such a course give only superficial impressions, a smattering of many things, while sacrificing any grasp of the languages? And is not all this really over the heads of all but mature students?"

Let me answer these objections in the most open and ingenuous manner, by admitting them *in toto*. These are indeed the rocks on which our ship may be wrecked, if we are not careful pilots. But our ship must not therefore remain in harbor; every voyage has its risks. It is only fair to say that I am not suggesting that our voices should drown out the voices of Thucydides and Virgil; it seems to me that their voices would have a chance to be heard more often and more intelligibly than now. Though there is a real danger of obtruding our personalities and our interpretations

too much, is it not better to risk having a teacher of biased views than to risk allowing the student, for lack of guidance, to get distorted impressions? And could anything be much more superficial than the present acquaintance of most of our students with the significance of what they read? As to the possibility of losing command of the languages, I agree; there's the rub. But the question is one of proportion. I have seen something like what I am suggesting in operation in a college class, with but slight loss of linguistic knowledge, and with a great increase of enthusiasm and understanding on the part of the students. I have tried the experiment with a class of boys beginning Greek of giving one quarter of the time to what we called "The Experience of the Greeks"; and this class actually progressed faster than its predecessors in mastering the elements of the language, for they knew that the continuance of the experiment, which they appeared to enjoy, was conditional on their success in keeping up, in the abbreviated time, with the program of work in grammar.

I hesitate to suggest any definite allotment of time; for much depends on local conditions. Nevertheless it seems to me that schools might well devote from one-quarter to one-third of the time that is available for classics to the study of what I have termed the experience of the Greeks and the Romans, and that colleges might safely spend half of such time in this way. In these few moments I cannot show in detail how the many topics could be fitted into a reasonably confined schedule of hours; I am convinced, however, that the more important parts of the plan that I have outlined could be presented in one hour a week in a Freshman course, leaving the remaining time for the acquisition of the language and the careful reading of texts; and single phases of the plan could be amplified in subsequent courses. In some cases provision might be made for those who have no knowledge of the language; in others, smaller groups of students specializing in classics could supplement the more general work by intensive reading of texts, by composition, and in other ways.

Granted, however, that time can be found for such study of the experience of the Greeks and the Romans as I have sketched, is it all too difficult for ordinary students in school or college, and too

much loaded down with abstractions and questions that might well puzzle older heads? Well, as I have sketched it, there have been a good many abstractions: but the business of an abstract is to abstract. In carrying out such a scheme, the teacher would introduce all the concrete detail at his command; he would use narrative material whenever he could, and make every possible appeal to the imagination. None the less, the most valuable part of such a study would lie in the constant attempt to draw conclusions of a general nature, to point out analogies with modern civilizations, to emphasize not experiences, but experience. I am quite ready to agree that parts of this scheme are too difficult for all except advanced students, and that only those parts of it which can be rather concretely presented are suitable for schools. It is true, of course, that the whole plan requires more of the teacher and of the student than does the usual curriculum. It is easier to "translate and comment on" a given passage than to arrive at a valuable conclusion about the experience of a gifted race. I am not sure that you will consider that a real argument against making the attempt. Never has the world stood more in need of wise counsel from men and women of experience. How can we better serve this need than by trying to open to the use of the world, and to help the world to understand, the garnered and winnowed experience of ages?